DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 561 CS 215 617

AUTHOR Sledd, James
TITLE Composition and Civic Education.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Ladders; *Educational Attitudes; *English Departments; Faculty Development; *Faculty Promotion; Higher Education; Part Time Faculty; *Politics; *Student Needs; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses civic educators on the left, who "babble" about liberation and empowerment by transformative intellectuals. The paper argues that many of those "leftists" belong to the group that could be called "boss" compositionists, comfortable lower managers of a corrupt system, who never tire of denouncing the traditional or of advertising their own alleged revolution in composition. The paper states that (1) "boss" compositions can produce little evidence that they have improved students' writing more than their denigrated predecessors improved it; (2) the liberators and empowerers have done little to improve the lot of the graduate students and other contingent workers who actually teach composition; (3) the intellectual quality of their heralded discipline is unremarkable; (4) by their careerism, the boss compositions have duplicated the wider society's brutal division of haves and have nots; and (5) in consequence the deepest lesson of the revolution in composition is the lesson of upward mobility in the main stream, the lesson of going along to get along. The paper offers three brief examples to substantiate these points, two of which are recent books about the subject. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Sledd
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 403 561

James Sledd

Composition and Civic Education

(Paper Read at the Roundtable on the Research Paper, CCCC 1996)

For this convention, under the heading "Ethics of Teaching Writing," I proposed a twenty-minute discussion of "Composition and Civic Education." Looking at the work of civic educators on both Right and Left, I proposed to argue that both groups teach more by what they do than by what they say and that the lessons taught by practice, not precept, are often bad. My proposal had just nothing to do with the research paper, and I was assigned to this roundtable through either bureaucratic incompetence or bureaucratic malice. I didn't reject the assignment because I believe that what I'm saying needs to be said despite the bureaucracy, in which I have no confidence. To get a hearing, I'm quite willing to be cast as irrelevant scapegoat. As academics, we need to realize that academic life subjects us to continuous brain-washing--brain-washing sometimes so successful that well-meaning professionals can in all sincerity believe the unbelievable.

Since we are all forbidden to change our proposed topics, I will respect my proposal and will use my limited time to talk mainly about civic educators on the Left, who babble about liberation and empowerment by transformative intellectuals. Many of those Leftists belong to the group that I call boss compositionists, comfortable lower managers of a corrupt system, who never tire of denouncing the current traditional or of advertising their own alleged revolution in composition. I maintain (1) that the boss compositionists can produce little evidence that they have improved students' writing more than their denigrated predecessors improved it, (2) that the liberators and empowerers have done little to improve the lot of the graduate students and

CS215617

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

other contingent workers who actually teach composition, (3) that the intellectual quality of the heralded discipline of composition is unremarkable, (4) that by their careerism the boss compositionists have duplicated the wider society's brutal division into haves and haven'ts, and (5) that in consequence the deepest lesson of the revolution in composition is the lesson of upward mobility in the polluted main stream, the lesson of going along to get along. To say all that in less than ten minutes, I must argue from brief examples, hoping that mere hints will prompt your own thinking.

Example 1.

At the University of Texas in 1990, Professor Linda Brodkey provoked an academic food-fight by proposing a new syllabus for the required freshman course in composition. The squalid fracas drew national attention, but nobody said much about Brodkey's reason for imposing her new order. The teaching assistants who taught her course in writing, Brodkey said repeatedly, didn't know how to do it. She had to guide them. The University of Texas and its English Department, that is to say, had for years assigned the teaching of a basic required course to incompetent teachers; and that scandal had gone unchecked by a much advertised program in composition and rhetoric. The freshmen had been taught by unprepared graduate students, while boss compositionists had prepared new Ph. D.s in rhetoric to become boss compositionists themselves; yet nobody found that situation remarkable. Now add that boss compositionists constantly complain about the research gap between them and real teachers and about the persistence of current traditional methods. If the boss compositionists haven't reached the teachers, and if their colleges and universities continue to exploit teaching assistants, part-timers, and temporaries, and if graduates of rhetoric programs aim to become bosses too, then the boss compositionists' self-praise is empty. They are overseers on Pomocompo Plantation--obishas who would like

to marry ol' massa's daughter and move into the big house.

Example 2.

In 1995, Joseph Janangelo and Christine Hansen (an admirable young scholar) edited Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs, a volume which exudes the desire for upward mobility toward promotion, tenure, respect, and good money. Though I would not say that the contributors to the volume have sold out, they have definitely bought in to the Profession. They see no contradiction between their own push for higher status and their assumption that the systematic exploitation of the real teachers will continue, perhaps with slight amelioration by beneficence from above.

Amusingly, the professionalized contributors manage inadvertently to undermine the newly current tradition of vast claims for the supposed discipline which they profess. One footnote acknowledges that although the boss compositionists laugh at the old emphasis on correctness, many other faculty and many employers are concerned for such detail. One essay raises the damning question of the state of composition in two-year colleges, which teach about one-half of composition's post-secondary students. It isn't clear that the great murky wave of research has reached those students and their part-time teachers or (if it has) that the vaunted new methods are improvements on the old. Several essays recognize that indeed thabe are many ways of teaching composition, some old, some new, and that no way can be simply labeled best. Present methods of evaluation don't allow anyone to demonstrate (and certainly not to measure) improvement in students' writing by any program. To this implied indictment of false advertising, it's hardly necessary to add that the book itself offers no definitions of writing or of improvement. A writing program administrator is, then, an administrator of we know not what.

Example 3.

Only this year, the Southern Illinois University Press published Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change, a large volume edited by Lynn Bloom, Donald Daiker, and Edward White, all of whom had worked with the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The book grew from a conference organized by the editors in 1993, with assistance from the MLA, the NCTE, and the 4Cs. It is the quintessential establishment effort.

Discussion could repeat much that I have said of my first and second examples, just as the book itself repeats many of the criticisms of composition studies and boss compositionists that dissidents, scorned by the established, have offered for many years. A mildly dyspeptic but perceptive reader might conclude that the boss compositionists have failed in everything but status-seeking.

Practical failures are reflected in "the new abolitionism" (the move to abolish freshman English as a requirement) and in the repeated acknowledgment that the number of exploited teachers has increased while their working conditions have not improved. The alleged revolution in composition was to make all things new, but the transformative intellectuals have not empowered even the subordinates to whom their social responsibility is greatest.

Intellectual failure prompts the careful reader's gradual realization that composition studies is an unbounded chaos and that the conference was a discursive zoo. Yet polysyllabic conferees like John Trimbur glorify their chaos as a postmodern pastiche, a heterogeneous and polyvalent multiplicity that resists "positivist certainties and foundational accounts." Trimbur is quite positive that the foundations of his own certainties are unshakable. Another eminence among the conferees, James Slevin, uses the word discipline nineteen times on a single page but redefines that God-term "not as the knowledge of a

particular area of inquiry and not as the professional conversation about that knowledge" but as "the activity of passing on important knowledge and nurturing in a new generation the powers than enable such knowledge." Readers are not told what knowledge or why it is important, so that composition studies becomes indistinguishable from animal husbandry or abnormal psychology. Some boundaries, however, despite the theme of this present conference ("transcending boundaries"), should be maintained and not transcended. Examples are provided by mathematics, logic, law, morality, religion, and double yellow lines on highways.

What further conclusions and what suggestions for action can I now append to my examples of civic education as it is actually practiced? Primarily, I am compelled to recognize, after over sixty years in major universities, that a person who chooses to work in post-secondary composition in the United States chooses some degree of complicity in a cofrupt and exploitative system.

The happiest souls among successful systemites are the good professionals who accept the system uncritically, push hard for their own status and privilege, yet genuinely believe that they are liberators, empowerers, transformative intellectuals. They pave hell.

Less quiet souls among the professionally successful build careers, relish their success, but try (within the system's rules) to ameliorate the inevitable consequences of those very rules. Their consciences are clear, but their meliorism obstructs deep change.

The genuinely unquiet among the risen can manage only rudimentary self-deception. They calm their uneasy consciences by guerilla warfare from the margins. Like the ameliorators, the marginalized guerillas (whom I joined in the 60s after getting tenure) accomplish little with much effort.

To the extent that beneficial change is possible, its most promising agents are the system's victims, the real teachers, whose struggle for justice

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

happily conicides with their self-interest. With rebellious teachers, the guerillas should make common cause, though in the full awareness that if the exploited overcome their exploitation but remain within the system, the system will make them exploiters in their turn. That is the system's nature. Yet one need not believe, in order to struggle, that struggle will succeed.

I've tried not to spoil your party. I hope you will read what I've written and will think about it.

[Postscript, January, 1997. After the conference, I submitted my paper to CCC. The editor rejected it, saying I had said it all before. The audience who heard the paper was enthusiastic and asked for copies. I myself thought a lot of it was new (not just the thumbnail reviews of two new books).]